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LIMDIS

FOL REPEAT BEIRUT 3203 SENT ACTION SECSTATE DIA INFO AMMAN CAIRO
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QUOTE

S E C R E T BEIRUT 3203

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DEPT PASS SECRETARY'S PARTY

E.O. 11652: GDS

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SUBJECT: RECENT CLASHES IN SIDON AND THEIR POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS

SUMMARY: POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS RESULTING FROM RECENT
CLASHES BETWEEN LEBANESE ARMY AND "ARMED ELEMENTS"
(MOSTLY FEDAYEEN) IN SIDON HAVE DANGEROUSLY AROUSED
CONFESSIONAL FEELINGS IN LEBANON. WHILE WISER HEADS
AMONG COUNTRY'S TRADITIONAL POLITICAL LEADERS ARE WORK-
ING HARD TO COMPOSE FEELINGS AMONG EXTREMIST ELEMENTS

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IN MOSLEM AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, GOL HAS BECOME FUR-

THER DISCREDITED IN EYESS OF SUBSTANTIAL PORTION OF MOSLEM POPULATION, AND LEBANESE ARMY'S ABILITY TO CONTROL FEDAYEEN- MUCH LESS TO ACT WITH CONFIDENCE AND APPROVAL OF MOST LEBANESE - HAS BEEN REDUCED SIGNIFICANTLY. IN OUR VIEW, ANY ISRAELI RETALIATION IN NEAR FUTURE FOR MAR 5 TERRORIST RAID ON TEL AVIV IN LIGHT RECENT ARMY/CIVILIAN CLASHES WOULD FORCE LEBANESE ARMY TO RESPOND OR LOSE ALL CREDIBILITY WITH LEBANESE PUBLIC. END SUMMARY

1. SECURITY SITUATION IN BEIRUT CONTINUES TO IMPROVE IN MOST VISIBLE RESPECTS SINCE LAST WEEKEND. DEMONSTRATIONS AND OTHER STREE DISTURBANCES HAVE LARGELY CEASED AND CITY HAS MORE OR LESS RESUMED NORMAL ACTIVITY. IN SIDON, HOWEVER, GENERAL STRIKE ENFORCED BY LEFTIST AND FEDAYEEN ELEMENTS CONTINUES TO PREVAIL, AND TOWN-WHILE OUTSARDLY QUIT--REMAINS ENTIRELY UNDER CONTROL OF "ARMED ELEMENTS" (MOSTLY FEDAYEEN) WHO SEIZED KEY POSITIONS IN AND AROUND SIDON FEB 26.

2. LOCAL POLITICAL SCENE HOWEVER REMAINS TENSE AND UNSETTLED, AS LEBANON'S SUNNI MOSLEM COMMUNITY, INCLUDING VIRTUALLY ALL ITS POLITICAL LEADERS, CONTINUES TO AGITATE STRONGLY AGAINST GOL AND LEBANESE ARMY OVER WHAT SUNNIS INSIST WAS LATTER'S UNWARRANTED INTERVENTION IN TROUBLES IN SIDON. (THIS ANTI-GOL AGITATION HAS LATELY BEEN JOINED BY SHI'ITE DMAM MUSA SADR, WHO HAD REMAINED CURIOUSLY SILENT THROUGHOUT MOST OF LAST WEEK'S TROUBLES.) SUNNIS ARE ALSO HOLDING GOL RESPONSIBLE FOR DEATH OF MAAROUF SAAD (WHOM ARMY BELIEVES WAS NOT RPT NOT KILLED BY ARMY BULLETS) AND ARE DECRYING WHAT THEY REGARD AS GENERALLY ANTI-MOSLEM ATTITUDES DISPLAYED AT HIGHEST LEVELS OF FRANGIE REGIME. SUNNIA AND LEFTIST LEADERS HAVE JOINED IN DEMANDING INTER ALIA (A) THAT ARMY LEADERSHIP BE CONTROLLED BY "COMMAND COUNCIL" THAT WOULD OSTENSIBLY GIVE NON-CHRISTIANS GREATER VOICE IN DETERMINING MILITARY POLICIES, (B) THAT CONCESSION GRANTED BY GOL TO CHAMOUN'S "PROTEIN" FISHING COMPANY BE REVOKED, AND (C) THAT ARMY COMMANDER IN SIDON (WHO IS A MOSLEM) BE REPLACED. PRIMIN SOLH HAS LOST HEAVILY IN CRISIS AND WOULD PROBABLY BE FORCED RESIGN WERE IT NOT THAT MOST RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL LEADERS DO NOT WANT CABINET CRISIS UNDER PRESENT CONDITIONS. PRIMIN SOLH, IN RESPONSE TO ABOVE PRESSURES,

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HAS EVIDENTLY DECIDED TO ADOPT MANY SUNNI-LEFTIST DEMANDS AS HIS OWN AND TO PRESS FOR THEIR FULFILLMENT AS PRICE OF HIS CONTINUANCE IN OFFICE.

3. WITH COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETING SCHEDULED FOR THIS EVENING (MAR 12) AND CONFESSIONAL FEELING STILL RUNNING HIGH, THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE SPECULATION THAT CABINET SPLIT (ALONG CHRISTIAN-MOSLEM LINES) OVER ABOVE DEMANDS

WOULD CAUSE SOLH GOVT TO FALL, LEADING TO PROLONGED AGGRAVATION OF CRISIS AND MOSLEM "BOYCOTT" (I.E., BY PASSIVE AND PERHAPS NOT-SO-PASSIVE RESISTANCE) OF FRANGIE REGIME ALTOGETHER. FORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, MODERATE LEADERS ON BOTH SIDES HAVE REMAINED IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH ONE ANOTHER THROUGHOUT CRISIS, ATTEMPTING TO RESOLVE MATTERS BY TRADITIONAL LEBANESE MEANS OF COMPROMISE AND CONCILIATION AND TO RESTRAIN THEIR MORE EXTREME ASSOCIATES AND FOLLOWERS FROM EXACERBATING TENSIONS FURTHER. OVER PAST 24 HOURS, THESE EFFORTS SEEM TO HAVE BORNE FRUIT. PROSPECT AT THIS WRITING IS THAT CHRISTIAN CABINET MINISTERS AND PRES FRANGIE WILL AGREE TO ACCEPT SUNNI-LEFTIST DEMANDS FOR "STUDY" BY SPECIAL MINISTERIAL COMMISSION AND THAT PRIMIN SOLH, TOGETHER WITH HIS JUMBLATTIST AND SUNNIT COLLEAGUES IN CABINET, WILL HOLD ON TO THEIR PORTFOLIOS AT LEAST FOR TIME BEING.

3. COMMENT: CONFUSED AND EMOTION-RIDDEN SITUATION DESCRIBED ABOVE REPRESENTS PROBABLY ONE OF MORE SERIOUS UPSURGES OF CONFESSIONAL FEELING IN RECENT YEARS. CONTRIBUTING FACTOR, OF COURSE, CAN BE FOUND IN WIDESPREAD UNCERTAINTY AND UNEASINESS EXPERIENCED BY LEBANESE AND PALESTINIANS ALIKE OVER FUTURE COURSE OF ME SETTLEMENT EFFORT AND WHAT IT SPELLS FOR THEM. ANOTHER SOURCE OF CURRENT INSTABILITY, HOWEVER, DOUBTLESS STEMS FROM GROWING MOSLEM DISGRUNTLEMENT OVER FRANGIE REGIME'S INCREASING INSENSITIVITY TO MOSLEM INTERESTS AND ASPIRATIONS IN CONDUCT OF GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS. EVENTS OF PAST TWO WEEKS IN SIDON AND BEIRUT HAVE GIVEN LEFTIST (ESPECIALLY COMMUNIST AND BAATHIST) ELEMENTS AN UNUSUALLY GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY ON LATENT SUNNI FEELINGS IN THIS REGARD, SUPPLEMENTING THEIR ONGOING EFFORTS TO DERIVE ADVANTAGE FROM GENERAL POPULAR DISCONTENT STEMMING FROM GOL'S ABYSMAL NEGLECT

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OF PRESSING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS. GIVEN PRESENT HIGHLY-CHARGED STATE OF SUNNI FEELINGS AND UGLY CHRISTIAN BACKLASH, WHICH SUNNI AGITATION HAS EVOKED, THEY APPEAR TO HAVE MADE THE MOST OF THIS OPPORTUNITY.

4. EVEN MORE MISCHIEVOUS ROLE HAS BEEN PLAYED BY FEDAYEEN. FEDAYEEN PARTICIPATION IN SIDON CLASHES AND IN WIDESPREAD ANTI-GOL DEMONSTRATIONS THAT FOLLOWED WAS FACTOR WHICH CERTAINLY EQUALLED, AND PROBABLY SURPASSED, LEFTIST ROLE IN POLARIZING CONFESSIONAL FEELING OVER PAST WEEK. RELIABLE LEBANESE ARMY SOURCE (DEPUTY COS FOR OPERATIONS BRIG KANAAN) CONFIRMS OUR INITIAL SUSPICION (BEIRUT 2611) THAT "LEFTIST" FEDAYEEN ELEMENTS (NOT ONLY FROM "REJECTIONIST" GROUPS BUT ALSO ELEMENTS FROM SA'QA AND FATAH AS WELL) AT LEAST TOOK ADVANTAGE OF SIDON AFFAIR FROM VERY START,

ALTHOUGH HE CLAIMS THAT OTHER FEDAYEEN UNITS--AND NOT JUST "MILITIA" FROM NEARBY CAMPS--QUICKLY JOINED IN, WITH OVERALL COMMAND BEING ASSUMED BY FATQAH'S "LEFTIST" MILITARY LEADER ABU SALEH (RECENTLY RETURNED FROM EXILE IN EAST BERLIN). RESULT WAS THAT LEBANESE ARMY, WHEN IT ATTEMPTED WITH ONLY 100-150 TROOPS TO FORCE OPEN MAIN COASTAL ROAD AT SIDON ON EVENING MAR 1 (BEIRUT 2837), FOUND ITSELF OPPOSED BY OVER 1,000 FEDAYEEN FIRING MACHINE-GUNS, RPG ROCKETS AND RECOILLESS RIFLES FROM ROOFTOPS AND OTHER FORTIFIED POSITIONS IN AND AROUND SIDON'S OLD CITY. (KANAAN SAYS THAT ARMY KILLED SOME 25-30 FEDAYEEN DURING THIS FIGHTING AND THAT ARMY'S OWN LOSSES WOULD HAVE BEEN HEAVIER HAD ITS TROOPS NOT BEEN USING ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS).

5. GIVEN DEEP CONCERN AMONG RESPONSIBLE MEMBERS MOSLEM AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES THAT CRISIS MIGHT DEGENERATE INTO SERIOUS CONFESSIONAL STRIFE, CHANCES ARE GOVERNMENT WILL CONTAIN CRISIS AND SOLH CABINET WILL REMAIN IN OFFICE FOR TIME BEING. ARMY, HOWEVER, HAS UNFORTUNATELY BECOME SUBJECT OF CONFESSIONAL CONTROVERSY, HAS BEEN HURT BY CRISIS AND ITS ABILITY (ALREADY LIMITED) TO CONTROL FEDAYEEN SORELY WEAKENED. MANY LEBANESE OF BOTH FAITHS, PROBABLY CORRECTLY, CONSIDER CRISIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN AVOIDED BUT FOR ENTRY OF ARMY INTO SIDON. SOME, UNFAIRLY, BLAME ARMY FOR ACTION ORDERED BY CIVILIAN GOL LEADERSHIP. GIVEN THESE SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, ISRAELI RETALIATION AGAINST LEBANON IN NEAR FUTURE FOR MAR 5 TERRORIST RAID ON TEL AVIV WOULD PLACE GOL IN IMPOSSIBLE POSITION VIS-A-VIS MANY OF ITS OWN CITIZENS, AS WELL AS FEDAYEEN, IF IT DOES NOT ORDER ARMY TO RESPOND.

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CUMSTANCES, ISRAELI RETALIATION AGAINST LEBANON IN NEAR FUTURE FOR MAR 5 TERRORIST RAID ON TEL AVIV WOULD PLACE GOL IN IMPOSSIBLE POSITION VIS-A-VIS MANY OF ITS OWN CITIZENS, AS WELL AS FEDAYEEN, IF IT DOES NOT ORDER ARMY TO RESPOND.

6. ALTHOUGH WE CAN WELL UNDERSTAND AND SYMPATHIZE WITH DEPTH ISRAELI FEELING AGAINST FEDAYEEN WHICH HAS RESULTED FROM MAR 5 RAID AND MAY BE PROMPTING GOL TO REPLY IN KIND, WE HOPE ISRAELI LEADERSHIP WILL THINK LONG AND HARD BEFORE UNDERTAKING ACTION WHICH COULD THREATEN INTEGRITY PRESENT LEBANESE REGIME AND WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY FORCE LEBANESE ARMY (AGAINST ITS WILL BUT OF NECESSITY -- I.E., TO AVOID BEING CLASSED AS TRAITORS IN SUNNI, LEFTIST AND FEDAYEEN EYES AFTER "HAVING KILLED BROTHER ARABS" IN SIDON) TO RESPOND ENERGETICALLY TO ANY ISRAELI ACTION.

GODLEY

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